French Immersion Series

ENHANCING LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT IN EARLY FRENCH IMMERSION WITH CLASSROOM TELEVISION

Plateau Effect in the French Language Development of Children in Immersion Programs

Principal Investigators
M. PARIGON
F. MORRISON
P. OUIMOUETTE

This research project was funded under the Ministry of Education, Ontario.
It reflects the views of the authors and not necessarily those of the Ministry.

The Honourable Sean Conway, Minister

Ministry of Education

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ABSTRACT

A 1981 review of the literature indicated a relationship between theoretical ideas about "interlanguage", and the observed "plateau"in the acquisition of French skills that children in French immersion seemed to reach at the junior level. Several authors noted the similarity between several aspects of immersion students' spoken French and "pidgin languages"; that is, hybrid languages that develop to meet the communication needs of different language groups that are in contact with each other. Moreover, there are certain parallels between the learning situation in the immersion classroom and the circumstances surrounding the development of natural pidgins.

Such parallels suggest that the immersion pupils' learning of French might be enhanced by extending the language models to which they are exposed. To study this possibility, fourteen classes of third and fourth grade pupils, in Ottawa schools, viewed half-hour television programs, three times a week, to broaden the students' language exposure. The spoken French of children, in both experimental and control groups, was measured at the beginning and end of the study, by using an interview technique based on procedures developed by the U.S. Foreign Service Institute (FSI). Ratings on five factors (pronunication, grammar, vocabulary, fluency and comprehension) were combined to give an overall score. In addition, counts derived from transcripts of the taped interviews yielded scores for mean length of utterance, conjunctions and prepositions used, and the number of English intrusions. Data were analyzed by using a 2 x 2 factorial design, with grade level and treatment condition as the two factors.

There was a significant main effect for grade, but not for treatment, on the total FSI-type score. Both experimental and control groups showed similar increases at the grade 3 level; at the grade 4 level the control group showed a loss, while there was little change in the score for the experimental group.

The findings indicated a significant main effect for grade, on all four of the factors for which the ratings were analyzed. On two of these measures, the grade 3 control group showed greater improvement than the experimental group. At the grade 4 level the children in the experimental condition showed more gain or less loss on all four ratings.

Significant grade or treatment effects were not found in the analysis of the three measures obtained from the transcripts of the interviews. The direction of the differences was less consistent for these measures than for the FSI-type total score, or for the factor ratings.

It is possible that the use of television was less beneficial for grade 3 pupils than for those in grade 4, partially due to the difficulty of the language used in the programs. Moreover, the higher intrinsic motivation of the grade 3 pupils, as noted by their teachers, tended to reduce the motivating effect of the programs for this group.

Interventions such as these, which do not provide learners with far greater opportunities for actually speaking French, are unlikely to achieve substantial improvements in the pupils' command of the spoken language. In spite of the limitations of this exploratory study, the differences in the effect of the treatment at the two grade levels suggest that there is some value in this approach to language enhancement, and that suitable intervention can affect the speaking skills of immersion children.

INTRODUCTION

After early-entry immersion programs had been established in Ottawa, and elsewhere, for several years, and had been considered to be generally successful, comments were heard from parents and teachers that the early progress of the children seemed to reach a plateau during the junior grades. A survey of the literature, which was commissioned by the Research Centre of the Ottawa Board of Education (Parkin, 1981, revised 1983), indicated that what had come to be called the "plateau effect" in French immersion was related to the theoretical ideas about "interlanguage" proposed by Selinker (1972), and others. The details of this review of the related literature are given in the next section of this report.

The 1981 review of the literature suggested that if students in French immersion were to continue to improve their communicative skills, there was a need to enrich the students' language exposure, and to increase their contact with francophones. Later in the same year, a proposal was submitted to the Ministry of Education of Ontario for a study. This study would attempt to use carefully selected television programs, followed by discussions led by the teacher, to increase the level of productive French language capability of immersion students, in grades 3 and 4, in the schools of the Ottawa Board of Education.

The search for suitable television programs was very time consuming, and it was also considered necessary to conduct a pilot study in the spring of 1982. Consequently, it was not possible to establish the experimental classes until the following year.

A brief review of the literature is given in the next section of this report, and is followed by a description of the procedures used, and a report of the results obtained.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Even after four or five years of schooling in French, the immersion pupils' use of French lags well behind their ability to understand both spoken and written materials (Genesee and Chaplin, 1975). Although the pupils' ability to understand what they hear and read is more or less comparable to that of their francophone peers, their ability to use spoken French does not seem to develop very rapidly beyond a certain level of skill (Adiv, 1980). Findings, by a number of authors, confirm the dichotomy between the pupils' ability to produce the language and their ability to comprehend it (Harley and Swain, 1978; Spilka, 1976; Stern, 1978).

Indeed, several aspects of immersion students' spoken French are similar to characteristics of what linguists refer to as pidgins. Nesmer (1971) went so far as to discuss the phenomenon of classroom pidgins. Pidgins are languages that develop to meet the communications needs of two or more groups of people who speak different languages and are in contact with each other (Schumann, 1974). With this contact, especially if it tends to be rather limited, a sort of hybridization or pidginization occurs. This is evident in the imperfect speech patterns which the learners develop through their restricted contact with speakers of the other language.

There are many points of similarity between pidgin languages and immersion pupils' use of French. Table 1 lists the errors and strategies noted in studies of immersion students by a number of authors.

TABLE 1

ERRORS AND STRATEGIES NOTED IN THE WRITTEN AND ORAL PRODUCTION OF FRENCH IMMERSION STUDENTS

Error or Strategy	Authors reporting
NOUNS	
Gender (noun or article)	Harley (1979), Spilka (1976), Swain (1975a)
Noun/article number agreement	Swain (1975a)
PRONOUNS	
Form or gender	Adiv (1980), Buteau and Gougeon (1974) Mougeon and Belanger (in Harley, 1979) Selinker et al. (1975), Spilka (1976), Swain (1975a)
Pronoun placement	Adiv (1980), Selinker et al. (1975)
Pronoun omission	Adiv (1980), Spilka (1976), Swain (1975a)
ADJECTIVES	
Limited use	Adiv (1980), Buteau and Gougeon (1974), Swain (1975a)
Non-agreement of number	Swain (1975)
PREPOSITIONS	
Substitution, instrusion and omission	Adiv (1980), Buteau and Gougeon (1974), Spilka (1976), Swain (1975)
VERBS	
Substitution	Adiv (1980), Harley and Swain (1978), Selinker et al. (1975)
Incorrect auxiliary	Adiv (1980), Hamayan and Tucker (1979), Harley and Swain (1978), Spilka (1976), Swain (1975a)
Incorrect inflection	Adiv (1980), Hamayan and Tucker (1979), Harley and Swain (1978), Spilka (1976), Swain (1975, 1975a)
STRATEGIES	
Small, repeated vocabulary	Buteau and Gougeon (1974, Lambert (1974), Swain (1975)
Simplified sentence structures	Adiv (1980), Hamayan and Tucker (1979), Lambert (1974), Selinker et al. (1975), Spilka (1976), Swain (1975, 1975a), Taylor (1978)

Beyond a doubt, pupils in French immersion programs quickly reach a level of ability that allows them to communicate effectively, if inelegantly, with classmates, teachers, and - perhaps to a lesser degree - with other francophones (Genesee and Chaplin, 1975; Adiv and Marcos, 1979).

The immersion students' use of French is, at times, structurally unlike either standard French, or standard English directly translated into French. The sentences they produce tend to be shorter, simpler, less redundant, and less varied in terms of using several different ways of saying the same thing (Adiv, 1980; Hamayan and Tucker, 1979).

The active vocabularies of immersion pupils are relatively limited, and certain classes of words (e.g. adverbs) remain essentially unused (Buteau and Gougeon, 1974; Lambert 1974; Swain, 1975). Certain types of errors are found repeatedly across the populations studied. Not only are some errors systematically repeated by individual students, they are also systematically repeated by different learners in different settings.

Not only is the speech production of immersion pupils similar to that of pidgin speakers, but there are a number of ways in which the learning situation of the immersion classroom and the circumstances surrounding the development of natural pidgins parallel each other. These parallels set both apart as being distinct from learning either the native language or a subsequent language, when one enters (more or less fully) the linguistic environment of the language to be learned.

Nesmer (1971), and others (Sampson, 1978; John, 1980), suggested that in learning or acquiring a second language, an individual passes through a number of approximations of the target language, and that each of these approximate languages is a valid and dynamic, although rather unstable, language system. Nesmer also briefly drew attention to what he called "learner pidgins", which are the "type employed by language students who have attained L2 fluency without mastery of its fundamentals, but have arrived at a stage of instruction where attention has largely shifted from form to content."

Selinker (1972) brought further clarity to this area with his "Interlanguage Hypothesis". The Interlanguage Hypothesis (IL) claims that "second language speech rarely conforms to what one expects native speakers of the target language (TL) to produce, that it is not an

exact translation of the native language (NL), that it differs from the TL in systematic ways, and that the forms of the utterances produced in the second language by a learner are not random" (Selinker, Swain and Dumas, 1975).

Some obvious parallels exist between these theoretical notions, about pidgins and interlanguages, and what is actually found in the French immersion classroom situation. The essence of the immersion setting is a contact situation between two language groups - one represented by the students, and the other represented by the teacher. Through this contact the students gradually develop a simplified language system, which allows them to communicate with the teacher and each other (Szamosi et al., 1979). The students make systematic errors (as well as random errors) similar to those made by persons acquiring a first or second language, in a fully naturalistic way (Dulay and Burt 1974, 1974a; Ervin-Tripp, 1974; Lightbrown, 1977).

The immersion system for learning a language depends, in theory, on the students acquiring the greatest portion of what they learn by being exposed to the language in the school situation, and a relatively small portion of what they learn through formal instruction in the language. The principle involved in this type of learning is that students acquire language by imitation - by forming their own speech patterns after those they hear[1]. In the naturalistic learning of a language, learners hear many persons speaking the language to each other, as well as to the learner. In this way two kinds of models are available: one a basic, usually simplified model used for communicating with the learner, and the other a second target model of the language as it is usually spoken. Gradually, the simplified learner model is phased out as the learner's speech approaches the target model. In the immersion classroom, especially in the early years, there is only one model (i.e., the learner model), since this is the model the teacher must use to communicate with students who are not prepared to be spoken to at the target model level.

In the classroom, when students first enter the immersion program, the only normative model of the L2 is the teacher's speech. In the initial phases of learning, the teacher is obviously the only one who has a fluent and apparently correct command of the L2. Hence, the teacher's speech is the only model for which the students have to aim. Over time, as

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1 Taylor (1978) nicely distinguishes between learning and acquiring language in terms of both method and achievement. Immersion programs, while partly aimed at language learning, put the bulk of effort into language acquisition.

individual students approach fluency, they begin to model their speech based on what they hear from each other. Even assuming that the teachers speak perfect L2, their power as normative models greatly diminishes, while the number of relatively fluent classmates increases.

This stage in the students' language development corresponds to the conditions Schumann (1978) establishes for the development of a true pidgin. The model of standard usage of the target language is still available, but its relative availability is substantially reduced. In addition, although the students are in fact all members of the same language community, in the classroom it is as though they are members of different language communities who are able to communicate with each other through the vehicle of the classroom's language. Once the stage is reached when most, or all, of the students in a class have attained communicative or discourse fluency, the normative model is the speech more or less common to the group, and not the relatively standard L2 spoken by the teacher.

In Schumann's (1974) model, there will be little development within the pidgin language, as long as it meets the speaker's communication needs, and as long as those needs are not extended into areas of expression and social status marking. Determining the minimum level of fluency necessary for adequate classroom communication could well indicate the point of diminishing returns for the early immersion treatment.

These parallels between the immersion and pidgin development situations suggest, among other things, that the pupils' learning of French in the immersion setting might well be enhanced by broadening and extending the language models to which the pupils are exposed. The aim of the present study was to see if the students productive use of French could be enhanced by exposing them to systematic input of target level French, through the regular viewing and discussion of age-appropriate television programs in the classroom.

METHOD

The experimental condition consisted of having pupils watch a one half-hour television program, three times per week, followed by a 10 to 15 minute class discussion of the program. The control condition consisted of the normal curriculum, without augmentation. The programs used were selected for their interest to children and their availability, rather than for their educational merits. They included 12 or more episodes of each of two commercial programs popular with francophone children at this age level. These were made available for this

project by special arrangement with the distributor. There were also two shorter series with some relevance to social studies.

A number of teachers expressed concern about the quality of the materials, and third grade teachers expressed some special concerns about the vocabulary level of the programs. In spite of their initial skepticism, these teachers agreed that they would stay with the research study for at least a while. Ultimately, all the teachers stayed, and in fact became quite enthusiastic about the technique.

The study involved 406 third and fourth grade pupils, in 14 classes, from eight schools. Of these, ten classes with a total of 291 pupils were assigned to the experimental condition, and four classes with a total of 115 pupils were assigned to the control condition. Selecting the schools that were involved in this study was not done entirely at random. Not all schools agreed to take part in the study; one school agreed to participate only if it could be assigned to the control condition.

Of the 406 pupils, 202 (or approximately 50 per cent) were tested using a structured interview technique adapted from the Foreign Service Institute (FSI) language test. The interviews were done late in September, and tape recordings were made of each session. Once the interviewing was completed, the television programming was introduced into the experimental condition classrooms.

In May, all of the pupils who had been pretested and were still in the schools were retested. Once again, a structured interview technique was used, and recordings were made of the interviews. Tape recordings were examined and scored for approximately 40 per cent of the pupils who had been interviewed, at both the beginning and end of the study. The pre-test interviews given in September were scored for 34 children in grade 3, and 22 in grade 4, as well as for 25 children in these grades from the control classes.

The scoring procedures used were based on those developed by the U.S. Foreign Service Institute (FSI) for use with adults (Valette, 1977). In addition, measures of mean length of utterance, the number of conjunctions and prepositions used, and the number of English intrusions were obtained from written transcripts. ("Length of utterance" was the number of words spoken in response to a question or other stimuli provided by the tester.)

The scale used in the FSI interview consists of an over-all judgment about the student's speaking competence. A numerical rating procedure can also be used, and this was adapted for use with the children being tested. A six-point scale was used to rate each of five factors: pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension. These were then combined as shown in Table 2, placing the heaviest emphasis on grammar and secondary emphasis on vocabulary.

TABLE 2

WEIGHTING OF FIVE FSI FACTORS TO OBTAIN TOTAL SCORE

Factor	Weight given to rating					
	A	B	C	D	E	F
Pronunciation	0	1	2	2	3	4
Grammar	6	12	18	24	30	35
Vocabulary	4	8	12	16	20	24
Fluency	2	4	6	8	10	12
Comprehension	4	8	12	15	19	23

The weightings were developed experimentally for FSI use, to allow the numerical score to correspond to verbal descriptions of the five basic levels of proficiency. The modifications used in this study included the use of 10 levels of verbal description, and a modified conversion table (as shown in Table 3) which allows for a range of scores from 1 to 10 on the total score. The maximum possible score for each of the individual factors is shown in Table 2.

TABLE 3

CONVERSION TABLE FOR FSI-TYPE TOTAL SCORE

Score	Level	Score	Level
0 - 9	1	50 - 59	6
10 - 19	2	60 - 69	7
20 - 29	3	70 - 79	8
30 - 39	4	80 - 89	9
40 - 49	5	90 - 99	10

Difference scores were obtained for each subject on several measures, including the FSI-type converted score and four of its subscores: grammar, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension. The remaining three measures were based on mean length of utterance, use of conjunctions and prepositions, and English word intrusions.

Data were analysed using the General Linear Model of the SAS statistical programs to execute a 2 x 2 factorial design, with grade level and treatment condition as the two factors.

RESULTS

F ratios and the associated probabilities are shown in Table 4, for main effects of grade level and treatment condition of each measure. As can be seen from Table 4, one would consistently reject the null hypothesis that rate of language development, as measured by change in FSI scores, was the same for both grade levels. In fact, the data show that grade 4, students improved less than grade 3, or actually got worse in their language performance from September to May.

TABLE 4

F RATIOS OBTAINED FOR MAIN EFFECTS OF TREATMENT AND GRADE*

Measure	Main Effect Grade		Main Effect Treatment	
	F	α	F	α
FSI-type converted score	23.20	<0.01	3.29	0.07
Grammar	23.06	<0.01	5.38	0.02
Vocabulary	12.91	<0.01	2.37	0.13
Fluency	12.49	<0.01	0.46	0.50
Comprehension	20.31	<0.01	3.92	0.05
Mean length of utterance	0.28	0.60	0.24	0.63
Conjunctions & prepositions	1.35	0.25	1.18	0.28
English intrusions	3.01	0.09	0.14	0.70

* df=1 in all cases

Table 5 shows the means of overall FSI-type converted score for the two grade levels and the two treatment conditions. The maximum possible score of 10 represented a level equivalent to that of a native speaker, or a total score of 90-99. The increase in scores was similar for the experimental and the control group at the grade 3 level. At the grade 4 level, the control group showed a loss, while there was little change in the rating for the experimental group.

TABLE 5

CHANGES IN FSI-TYPE CONVERTED SCORES FOR GRADE 3 AND GRADE 4 CHILDREN IN EXPERIMENTAL AND CONTROL CLASSES

September 1982 and May 1983

Group	Experimental				Control			
	Mean	SD	N	Diff	Mean	SD	N	Diff
Grade 3								
September	3.1	0.6	34		3.0	0.7	14	
May	3.8	0.9	32		3.6	0.7	14	
				+0.7				+0.6
Grade 4								
September	3.6	0.7	22		3.4	0.8	11	
May	3.7	0.8	22		2.8	0.8	11	
				+0.1				-0.6

On the four ratings used to derive the difference scores, there was a significant main effect for grade on all of the measures, and for treatment on only two, as shown in Table 4. However, on two of these measures the grade 3 control group showed greater improvement than the experimental group, while at the grade 4 level the children in the experimental condition showed more gain or less loss on all four of the measures. Table 6 shows the results for the interview ratings of grammar, vocabulary, fluency and comprehension. The maximum possible scores ranged from 12 to 35, as indicated in Table 2.

TABLE 6

CHANGES IN RATINGS ON FOUR ASPECTS OF ORAL INTERVIEW FOR GRADE 3 AND GRADE 4 CHILDREN IN EXPERIMENTAL AND CONTROL CLASSES

September 1982 and May 1983

Measure and group	Experimental				Control			
	Mean	SD	N	Diff	Mean	SD	N	Diff
GRAMMAR								
Grade 3 (Sept.)	7.7	1.5	34		8.0	1.3	14	
Grade 3 (May)	9.5	2.0	32		9.1	1.2	14	
				+1.8				+1.1
Grade 4 (Sept.)	9.2	1.4	22		9.0	1.6	11	
Grade 4 (May)	9.6	1.5	22		7.6	1.5	11	
				+0.4				-1.4
VOCABULARY								
Grade 3 (Sept.)	6.6	1.3	34		6.0	1.3	14	
Grade 3 (May)	7.6	1.7	32		7.1	1.2	14	
				+1.0				+1.1
Grade 4 (Sept.)	7.3	1.4	22		7.0	1.6	11	
Grade 4 (May)	7.6	1.5	22		5.6	1.5	11	
				+0.3				-1.4
FLUENCY								
Grade 3 (Sept.)	5.7	1.2	34		5.1	1.7	14	
Grade 3 (May)	6.3	1.4	32		6.4	0.5	14	
				+0.6				+1.3
Grade 4 (Sept.)	6.3	0.7	22		5.8	1.4	11	
Grade 4 (May)	6.1	1.1	22		4.5	2.0	11	
				-0.2				-1.3
COMPREHENSION								
Grade 3 (Sept.)	8.3	2.2	34		8.0	2.7	14	
Grade 3 (May)	10.7	3.4	32		10.2	2.4	14	
				+2.4				+2.2
Grade 4 (Sept.)	10.4	2.6	22		9.7	3.1	11	
Grade 4 (May)	10.9	2.8	22		7.3	3.0	11	
				+0.5				-2.4

For the three measures obtained from the transcripts of the interviews, significant grade or treatment effects were not obtained in these analyses. As might be expected, the direction of the differences was less consistent for these measures than for those presented in Tables 5 and 6. Table 7 summarizes the results obtained.

TABLE 7

CHANGES IN MEASURES OF THREE ASPECTS OF ORAL INTERVIEW FOR GRADE 3 AND GRADE 4 CHILDREN IN EXPERIMENTAL AND CONTROL CLASSES

September 1982 and May 1983

Measure and group	Experimental Mean	SD	N	Diff	Control Mean	SD	N	Diff
MEAN LENGTH OF UTTERANCE								
Grade 3 (Sept.)	4.6	1.6	34		4.5	1.8	14	
Grade 3 (May)	9.1	3.9	32		10.1	3.2	14	
				+4.5				+5.6
Grade 4 (Sept.)	11.8	2.1	22		6.4	2.4	11	
Grade 4 (May)	10.9	3.9	22		9.1	3.9	11	
				-0.9				+2.7
CONJUNCTIONS AND PREPOSITIONS								
Grade 3 (Sept.)	50.1	19.8	34		50.1	22.6	14	
Grade 3 (May)	93.2	39.4	32		94.7	30.5	14	
				+43.1				+44.6
Grade 4 Sept.)	61.0	18.3	22		66.7	33.0	11	
Grade 4 (May)	119.4	35.7	22		101.6	44.9	11	
				+58.4				+34.9
ENGLISH INTRUSIONS								
Grade 3 (Sept.)	5.3	5.6	34		4.4	3.3	14	
Grade 3 (May)	2.8	3.9	32		3.9	3.7	14	
				-2.5				-0.5
Grade 4 (Sept.)	5.8	5.5	22		8.5	9.6	11	
Grade 4 (May)	3.2	2.1	22		3.2	2.3	11	
				-2.6				-5.3

DISCUSSION

One might speculate as to why the use of television was beneficial with the grade 4 pupils, but not with those in grade 3. There are two resons as to why this occured.

Firstly, as mentioned earlier, grade 3 teachers initially expressed some concern about the difficulty level of the language used in the programs, whereas fourth grade teachers generally felt that the language level was appropriate to their pupils' abilities. If the teachers initial impressions were correct, the programs might work better with fourth graders.

Secondly, after talking with many immersion teachers, one finds that there may be motivational differences between third and fourth graders. For example, some teachers felt that third grade pupils are more motivated by the intrinsic interest of their studies, but that those in grade 4 tend to be less interested in what the teachers offer. All of the teachers involved with the experimental condition were impressed with the motivating quality of the television intervention, but were clear about its lack of educational content. It is possible that pupils who are already motivated would gain very little from such materials, but that unmotivated pupils could profit from the motivation, if not from the content.

Finally, it must be noted that interventions such as these, that do not provide the learners with far greater opportunities for actually speaking in French, are unlikely to achieve substantial improvements in the pupils' command of the spoken language. In spite of the limitations of this exploratory study, however, the differences in the effect of the treatment at the two grade levels suggest that there is some value in this approach to language enhancement, and that suitable intervention can affect the speaking skills of immersion children.

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